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A Europe of multiple flows: Contested discursive integration in trans-European transport infrastructure policy-making¹

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Abstract

This paper presents an examination of the extent to which discursive integration is accompanying the European integration process, by focusing on the development of trans-European transport infrastructure networks. Because they facilitate movement across nation-state borders, these networks are central to European integration and have in fact constituted a key EU policy issue for more than two decades. Some authors have argued that their development has been driven by a hegemonic discourse that promotes the production of a ‘Europe of Flows’: a single, uniform space underpinned by a vision of ‘frictionless’ mobility through inter-city networks. However, the existence of such a discourse is questionable given the variety of rationales that may potentially influence the development of this type of infrastructure. Their claim is evaluated by means of an in-depth empirical study of the policy process surrounding a high-speed rail line of EU relevance in the Spanish region of the Basque Country. The analysis of the discursive constructions mobilized in this process indicates that the discourse on a ‘Europe of Flows’ is better conceptualized as one of the several storylines associated with different scales through which a wider hegemonic discourse is articulated. Whilst the heterogeneity of this discourse did not fundamentally contradict the development of a trans-European high-speed rail line, it did result in a policy compromise according to the influence the different coalitions were able to exert in the policy process. The analysis largely demonstrates the importance of considering the multi-scalar discursive landscape of policy-making in order to understand trans-European infrastructure development.

Keywords

Discourse analysis, European integration, high-speed rail, space of flows, trans-European infrastructure

Introduction

In early December 2015 the Swedish government announced the preparation of a proposal – eventually dropped – to make it possible temporarily to halt road traffic over the Øresund bridge linking Sweden and Denmark, given Sweden’s struggles to respond adequately to the number of refugees coming from mainland Europe (Reuters, 2015). Although not the only instance of the re-establishment of nation-state borders within the Schengen zone as a result of the recent refugee crisis, this case is significant because of the symbolic role of the Øresund link in materializing European spatial integration, through its facilitation both of unimpeded transport across borders (Jensen and Richardson, 2004: 221–222) and of cross-border region building in the EU (Hospers, 2006; Löfgren, 2008). The spatial integration of European space

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through transnational transport infrastructure is not a unique feature of the formal integration processes started in the aftermath of World War II (Badenoch and Fickers, 2010; Van der Vleuten and Kaijser, 2006); however, it was during this period and, in particular, over the last three decades that the EU-level of policy-making gained prominence. The EU Single Market, which was launched in 1993, entails the promotion of the free movement of goods, persons, services and capital, for which obstacle-free transport across nation-state borders is fundamental. Against this backdrop, since the 1980s significant transport infrastructure policy developments at EU level have taken place, particularly the Trans-European Transport Networks (TEN-T), a policy that seeks to support the development of trans-European networks of roads, rail, inland waterways and ports, seaports, airports and a combined transport network. Further to the introduction of a series of regulations in the mid-1990s, the current revised guidelines for their development and rules for granting EU financial aid were approved in 2013 (EP and Council, 2013a, 2013b).

The remarkable momentum of TEN-T policy has led some authors to argue that trans-European infrastructure development has been driven by a hegemonic discourse that promotes the production of a single, uniform European space, a ‘Europe of Flows’ or ‘monotopia’ underpinned by a vision of unimpeded mobility through inter-city networks (Hajer, 2000; Jensen and Richardson, 2004). However, the effectiveness of such a discourse seems to be compromised by the challenges European integration faces, recently made evident through the economic, financial and refugee crises (Bulmer and Joseph, 2015; Tosun et al., 2014) and the rise of Euroscepticism and nationalism exemplified by the outcome of the ‘Brexit’ referendum (Grevi, 2016).² In spite of the significant economic and political integration of the European Union over the last three decades, the member state is still central to the functioning of the EU (Bickerton, 2012) and the difficulties in constructing a European identity persist (Stavrakakis, 2005). Thus questions remain regarding the extent to which the arguments posed by the aforementioned actors represent an accurate description of major transport infrastructure development in Europe. Is it simply a vision on an integrated and seamless European space that is driving this process? Are there other imaginaries shaping it? What insights into the nature of European integration does this provide?

This paper seeks to shed light on the existence of such a hegemonic discourse – or, stated differently, on the extent to which discursive integration has taken place – by examining in-depth a particular case of trans-European transport infrastructure development. Specifically, it presents a discourse analysis of the policy process for a high-speed rail line project of clear relevance to the EU.

First, the contributions to the literature that have explored this issue, with a particular focus on the hegemonic discourse mentioned above, are critically reviewed. Next, the discourse analytical approach and the research strategy employed are then introduced. This is followed by a brief introduction to the case, and then the analysis of the case. The paper concludes with a reflection on the findings and their wider relevance for the literature on trans-European transport infrastructure development.

² The UK Government held a national referendum on 23 June 2016 on the matter of the UK’s continuing membership of the EU. The outcome was a majority (52% vs. 48%) of those who voted being in favour of the UK leaving the EU (although the majorities in Scotland and Northern Ireland were in favour of the UK remaining in the EU).

Discourse analysis and trans-European networks

Research on trans-European transport infrastructure policy and planning has tended to reflect the positivist, apparently value-free orientation of traditional transport geography (Hanson, 2000). Existing scholarship has generally been limited to explaining and evaluating the development of this type of infrastructure, by developing an understanding of policy processes (Holliday et al., 1991; Stephenson, 2003; Stevens, 2004), assessing the difficulties which the development of this type of infrastructure faces (Johnson and Turner, 1997; Nijkamp and Vleugel, 1995; Ross, 1995), and evaluating the capacity of TEN-T networks to fulfil the expectations placed on them (Ross, 1994; Spiekermann and Wegener, 2006; Vickerman, 1997).

However, some authors, small in number, have engaged in a more fundamental critique of TEN-T policy by focusing on its socially constructed nature. They have analyzed the existence and main characteristics of a hegemonic policy discourse (Hajer, 2000; Jensen and Richardson, 2004), its internal contradictions (Peters, 2003), the production of knowledge that legitimizes it (Richardson, 2006) and the limitations for environmental policy integration (Richardson, 1997). Through the unpacking of the discursive constructions that structure the dominant way of viewing transport infrastructure, these authors have endeavoured to reveal their assumptions and weaknesses, the knowledge that legitimizes them – and which in turn discredits other forms of knowledge – and the practices through which they are produced and reproduced.

This line of inquiry has been explored in particular by Jensen and Richardson through their work on the policy discourses articulated in the development of a European spatial planning agenda and on the relationship between power and knowledge (e.g. Jensen and Richardson, 2004; Richardson, 1999; Richardson and Jensen, 2000). They have argued that a policy discourse has emerged which seeks to produce a certain European space associated with a certain rationality, a space they named ‘monotopia’: ‘an organised, ordered and totalised space of zero-friction and seamless logistic flows’ (Jensen and Richardson, 2004: 3). This discourse has the concept of ‘frictionless (that is, unimpeded) mobility’ at its centre, but it also encompasses other aspects of spatial development: the polycentric development of its urban nodes; the subsidiary role of the environment; and the re-thinking of territorial identity issues that a monotopic Europe involves. Arguably, however, their spatial planning approach prevents them from considering in sufficient depth the differences between – and importance of – EU sectoral policies, which casts doubt on the feasibility of developing a coherent spatial project for the EU.

A more transport-focused account has been provided by Hajer (2000), who, in a brief article, has proposed the existence of a transnational policy discourse, which he termed ‘Europe of Flows’, that influences spatial development policy in Europe and is shared by policy-makers at different levels of government. Among other features, he noted that this discourse is committed to market integration and considers global competition as a strategic challenge for Europe; conceives the objectives of the EU as both enhancing competitiveness whilst promoting cohesion; perceives infrastructure as key to achieving these goals; and is committed to ecological modernization. According to Hajer, the Trans-European Networks should be understood as ‘a set of particular discursive practices within which a particular policy discourse is reproduced and transformed’ (Hajer, 2000: 138).

The emphasis in Hajer’s approach lies in the power of such a policy discourse and on the fact that its influence is not limited to EU-level actors. In order to explain the production and reproduction of the discourse, he employed the concept of the storyline (see below) to propose the narrative ‘from patchwork to network’, where ‘network’ can be interpreted as a metaphor of

European integration (Hajer, 2000). As he correctly observed, the network metaphor masks the discrepancies between elements included in it – for instance, the tensions between the objectives of cohesion and market integration. Despite the potential of this approach for understanding discourse production in trans-European infrastructure policy-making, the scope of Hajer's article is limited. Its focus is restricted to the content of discourse and does not include the institutional practices through which the discourse is created, reproduced and transformed; it does not address the temporal dimension; and, fundamentally, the analysis is tentative and open to being refined by further research.

In fact, among the actors that may share such a transnational policy discourse, tensions are likely to appear that could potentially undermine the discourse's influence. A first set of tensions may be located at the EU policy-making level. Peters' (2003) discourse analysis of EU transport infrastructure policy has indeed identified contradictions between the rationales underlying it and has further shown how cohesion and sustainable development goals have been persistently set aside in favour of those of growth and competitiveness. However, tensions may also appear between levels, beyond the EU level of policy-making. The nation-state is likely to be significant, particularly in sectors such as rail transport where it has had a prominent role in development and management, especially in the second half of the last (20th) century (Ross, 1998). Indeed, according to Stevens (2004) and Ross (1994, 1998) the protection of state-owned national rail systems has been a major factor in preventing a European approach to rail infrastructure development. Due to the different geographical, historical and cultural factors that have contributed to shape nation-state transport policies in Europe (Stevens, 2004: 32–34), it might be expected that the nation-state political arena would show its own dynamics. Cross-border links are liable to pose particular challenges, not only because of the presumably low priority of nationally peripheral lines but also due to the potential difficulties encountered in attempting to achieve consensus among the nation-states involved (Dörry and Decoville, 2016; Ross, 1995). Beyond the nation-state, actors associated with urban areas may regard trans-European infrastructure development as an opportunity to advance the competitive advantage of cities within supranational scales of capital circulation, as part of what Brenner (2004) has termed 'urban locational policies', to foster urban regeneration, as the oft-cited case of Lille shows (Newman and Thornley, 1995), and to link a poorly-integrated cross-border region, as Linnros and Hallin (2001) have demonstrated in their discourse analysis of the case of the Øresund link.

In summary, the contributions on the existence of a hegemonic discourse on the development of European space seem to underestimate the relevance of non-EU policy-making levels. Although they have endeavoured to reveal the assumptions and weaknesses of this discourse, the knowledge that legitimizes it and the practices through which it is produced and reproduced, Jensen and Richardson (2004) have not considered these other levels in sufficient detail or depth; and Hajer (2000) merely assumed that the discourse is shared across them. Given the foreseeable variety of rationales concerned, it is argued there that there is a need to clarify the extent to which a single hegemonic discourse underpins major transport infrastructure development in the EU and steers it towards the creation of a 'Europe of Flows'.

The remainder of this paper seeks to shed light on this issue by providing an in-depth empirical investigation that transcends an exclusive focus on EU policy-making.

Introduction to the case and methodology

Hajer's discourse analytical approach

In addition to having been adopted for the study of trans-European transport infrastructure politics in the EU (Hajer, 2000; Linnros and Hallin, 2001; Peters, 2003), Hajer's (1995) discourse analytical approach is particularly valuable because it addresses the two levels that Fischer (2003: 74) has argued are relevant to discourse: the socio-cultural level, in which discourse structures interpretation of phenomena and, consequently, behaviour; and the everyday level, where the dynamics of policy-making and the role of actors in discourse formation can be examined. In particular, Hajer sought to introduce into Foucault's abstract theory of discourse – as expressed by his later works (Foucault, 1991, 1998) – the role of individual action in discourse formation by drawing on social psychology (Billig, 1987; Davies and Harré, 1990). Hajer's definition of discourse encompasses both its structure and agency dimensions:

Discourse is here defined as a specific ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorizations that are produced, reproduced and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities (Hajer, 1995: 44).

Importantly, in Hajer's approach the focus of analysis involves not only the content of discourse but also the particular set of practices, understood as 'all the ways in which people actively produce social and psychological realities' (Davies and Harré, 1990: 45), through which it is produced, reproduced and transformed. In this respect a discourse can be said to be hegemonic when the conditions of structuration and institutionalization of discourse are satisfied (Hajer, 1995: 60–61). Discourse structuration occurs when actors need to draw on the terms of a given discourse in order to be credible; discourse institutionalization occurs when a given discourse is translated into specific policies and institutional arrangements.

In order to operationalize the analysis of discursive dynamics, Hajer proposed the use of two key middle-range concepts: storylines and discourse coalitions. A storyline is the 'basic linguistic mechanism' for creating and maintaining discursive order (Fischer, 2003: 86), 'a generative sort of narrative that allows actors to draw upon various discursive categories to give meaning to specific physical or social phenomena' (Hajer, 1995: 56). The assumption behind this conception is that actors resort not to comprehensive discursive systems when interpreting phenomena but, rather, to simpler narrative constructions which suggest unity in the diverse and separate discursive component parts of a problem (Hajer, 1995: 56). By allowing the overcoming of fragmentation and the achievement of discursive closure (Hajer, 1995: 62), they are an important cohesive element in the other middle-range concept: the discourse coalition. Because actors struggle to achieve discursive hegemony, Hajer has argued that they form coalitions around a set of storylines to which they adhere. He defined discourse coalitions as 'the ensemble of (1) a set of storylines, (2) the actors who utter these storylines, and (3) the practices in which this discursive activity is based' (Hajer, 1995: 65). The adoption of Hajer's discourse analytical framework thus involves a focus on the storylines through which understanding is structured; the formation of coalitions around such storylines; and the understanding of both storylines and discourse coalitions through the practices in which discourse is produced, reproduced, and transformed.

Case study research

In order to test the existence of a hegemonic discourse on a 'Europe of Flows', case study research was selected as the appropriate strategy because it involves the in-depth study of a complex and context-specific phenomenon that may serve as an illustration of a wider issue (Stake, 1995: 3). Although such a strategy has been commonly subject to criticism regarding its capacity to provide generalizable evidence, several authors have advocated its role in theory building beyond the common consideration of cases as samples intended for statistical generalization (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Stake, 1995: 7–8; Yin, 2009: 38). An unusual or atypical case is in fact likely to provide richer information than a representative case, by activating more actors and basic mechanisms (Flyvbjerg, 2006: 229). Accordingly, the case selected is the policy process on the Vitoria–Irun high-speed rail (HSR) line, the Spanish section of a cross-border link of the TEN-T network located both within a member state that has seen significant HSR development over the last two decades and within the Basque Autonomous Community (henceforth, Basque Country), a region with a high degree of autonomy and a considerable level of political mobilization. This distinctive scalar and political complexity is particularly suitable for examining empirically the existence of the aforementioned hegemonic discourse.

The in-depth nature of case study research and the need to triangulate data to provide solid evidence prompted the use of a wide range of sources of evidence. Drawing on Hajer (2006: 73–74), data of the following types were accessed and subsequently analysed using a qualitative data analysis software package (NVivo):

- Documents produced by organizations and news articles, for a first definition of discursive terms and a basic notion of processes and sites of discursive production;
- Semi-structured interviews with actors who had participated in the policy process to some degree, to obtain information about causal relationships and the meaning of particular events for them; and
- Parliamentary proceedings, to account for the argumentative exchange.

This paper draws on a selection of the documents and interviews obtained for a larger study of transport infrastructure politics and European integration. Most of the interviews were conducted face-to-face and in Spanish, and quotations were translated by the author.³

The Vitoria–Irun high-speed rail line

The development of a new rail line in the Basque Country has its origins in the mid-1980s, when the Spanish Government, responsible for the majority of the rail infrastructure in the country, started to plan the upgrading of the substandard Spanish network. The Basque Country, one of the two natural land connections between the Iberian peninsula and the European continent, had a rail network that linked poorly its three main cities with each other and with the Spanish and French networks; in addition it has, as does the rest of the Spanish network, a different track gauge from the standard gauge used in most of Europe. The Spanish 1987 Railway Transport Plan (Ministerio de Transportes, Turismo y Comunicaciones (MTTC), 1987) proposed a new link designed for speeds of 160 km/h between Bilbao and Vitoria which removed an existing bottleneck, but its lack of consideration regarding its integration with the European network through San Sebastian and Irun prompted Basque actors, in particular the government and the Chamber of Commerce of Bilbao, to lobby for a new cross-border link. A

³ Details of the interviews are listed in Appendix 1.

Basque Rail Plan proposed the development of a new Y-shaped line designed for maximum speeds of 200 km/h which used the Bilbao–Vitoria connection to improve the link between these two cities and the French border (Departamento de Política Territorial y Transportes (DPTT) and SENER, 1987). The Spanish infrastructure manager, RENFE, agreed to study this proposal with the Basque Government, but the development of such a study was to be affected by the Spanish Council of Ministers’ landmark 1988 decision to build new high-speed rail lines in standard track gauge (Ministerio de Transportes, Turismo y Comunicaciones (MTTC), 1988). The resulting report, the *Estudio de Alternativas Ferroviarias en el País Vasco*, defined the final basic characteristics of the line, maintaining the Y-shaped route of the previous proposal but adopting the design criteria for high-speed lines and mixed traffic (with maximum speeds of 250 km/h) and the standard gauge (Departamento de Política Territorial y Transportes (DPTT) and INECO, 1989). Figure 1 illustrates this gradual definition of the line’s route.

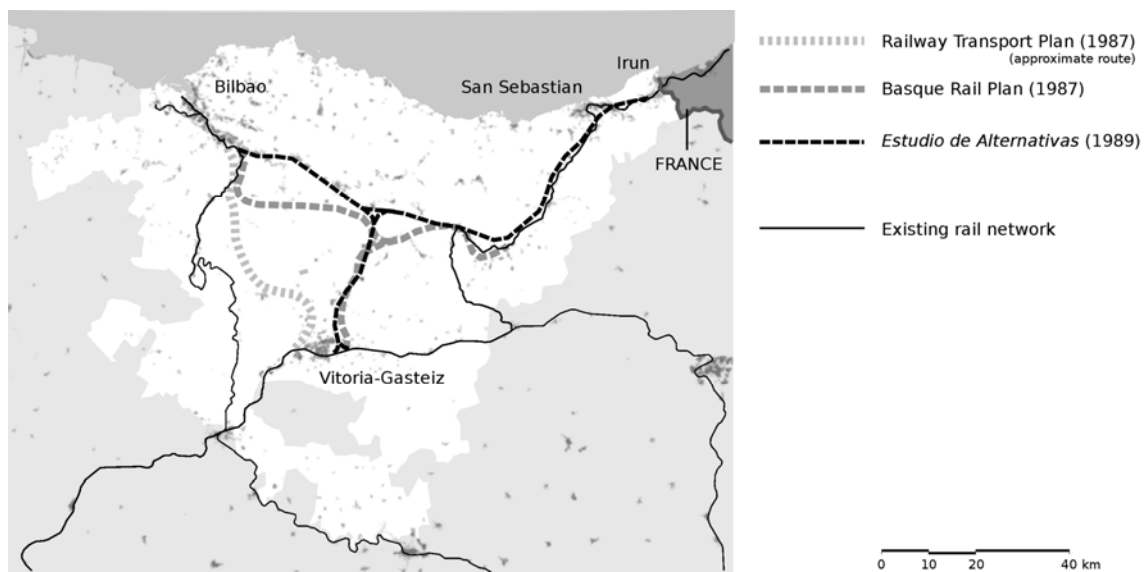


Figure 1. The Vitoria–Irun HSR line route evolution (1987–1989) (source: author).

During the process of the new HSR line between Vitoria and Irun being defined, high-speed rail as a policy issue gained prominence in both Spain and the EU. On the one hand, the 1988 decision of the Council of Ministers launched the significant development of high-speed rail lines in Spain, with the first being opened in 1992 between Madrid and Seville. On the other hand, and promoted by European state and business actors, in the early 1990s EU actors took determined steps to advance the development of a trans-European HSR network. By the end of 1990, a High Level Group on a trans-European HSR network, established by the Commission and comprising representatives of, among other institutions, the member states, had produced a first outline plan of a trans-European network, in which the Vitoria–Irun line was part of one of the 15 ‘key links’ that were deemed necessary for the satisfactory operation of the network (CEC, 1991). The inclusion of this line in the network was formalized in 1996, when the guidelines for the development of Trans-European Networks included it as part of one of the 14 projects to be given priority (EP and Council, 1996). Notwithstanding these wider developments, however, progress on the Vitoria–Irun line was slow and limited to the development of technical studies, essentially under the initiative of the Basque Government.

The timeline of the project was in fact determined by the Spanish Government, whose priority was instead the Seville–Madrid–Barcelona–French-border HSR corridor. Only once it approved its 1994 infrastructure plan (Ministerio de Obras Públicas, Transportes y Medio Ambiente (MOPTMA), 1994), which incorporated the – until then fragmentary – HSR developments, did the Vitoria–Irun line gradually gain momentum. Five months after its approval, the Spanish Government launched the production of the legally required *estudio informativo* for the new line, in effect a study defining its general characteristics. Although the production of this document did not involve significant changes in the project for the purposes of this paper, it prompted the participation and mobilization of Basque political actors. Significantly, this was at a time when an active and heterogeneous protest movement crystallized which notably included a number of Basque trade unions, environmental groups, left-wing political parties and an assembly-led organization with a strong anti-developmental stance. After a lengthy process, which included an extended period of public consultation, the *estudio* was finally approved in November 2000.

This approval marked the beginning of the implementation period, which in its first years was characterized by significant tensions between the Spanish and Basque Governments. Disagreements over the implementation timeline led to a conflict of competencies in which the Basque Government tried to tender the construction projects for the eastern branch of the line, between its central node and the French border. Nevertheless, by 2004 the project gained a new momentum when the Spanish Council of Ministers launched the tendering process for the project and construction of eight – out of the 15 – sections of the line (El País, 2004a). Although the change in the Spanish Government resulting from that year's general election resulted in a temporary setback, the improved relations between both governments was to provide the final impetus for the start of the construction work. In 2005, negotiations on the 2006 General State Budget in the Spanish legislature provided an opportunity to consolidate the willingness to cooperate on the line's implementation. An agreement was finally signed, by the two governments and the Spanish infrastructure manager, in April 2006, which established that the Basque Government would secure and advance the funding, to be recovered in the future, for the eastern branch of the line (El País, 2006). Construction of the line started in September 2006 and, according to the current Spanish minister, the line is presently (July 2016) planned to become operational in 2019 (El País, 2015).

A developmental discourse: different storylines within a hegemonic discourse

Although the account above illustrates how the differences in interests and agendas of the different actors involved influenced the development of the Vitoria–Irun line, these same actors have shared a general understanding of the line's necessity and benefits. The discourse analysis points at the existence of an overarching discourse that emerged in the second half of the 1980s and which considered the provision of transport infrastructure as essential to economic development within an economically integrating Europe. This developmental discourse shares many of its defining characteristics with Hajer's (2000) 'Europe of Flows' policy discourse.

- a. It sees *infrastructure as central to economic development*, in particular by promoting the conditions for economic development and productivity through investment and the reduction of transport costs.

- b. *The state is conceived as a catalyst* for economic and transport infrastructure development. Although its role is not necessarily reduced, the involvement of the private sector is sought.
- c. *High-speed rail is seen more as a modernized rail* rather than as a distinct transport mode with its own features and implications.
- d. As the focus is on infrastructure as a tool for economic development, planning is driven by *infrastructure provision*, rather than by demand management.
- e. Infrastructure provision is in turn seen as contributing to *enhance both the economic competitiveness and the balanced development* of a certain space.
- f. It is committed to *ecological modernization*: as such, it considers transport infrastructure development as potentially contributing to both economic growth and environmental protection.

Since the late 1980s not only has this discourse structured the understanding of the policy problem across the policy-making environment, but also it has been institutionalized through its translation into particular institutional arrangements and policies. This is certainly the case not only of the TEN-T policy initiative and the bodies set up alongside it, but also of other Spanish and Basque initiatives, as it is shown below. Indeed, this institutionalization determined the change from the initial Bilbao–Vitoria project to the Vitoria–Irun HSR line. From a first, moderate proposal based essentially on transport considerations (i.e. the removal of a bottleneck), the necessity of a new HSR line came to be seen as crucial for promoting balanced economic development and a sustainable transport system.

Nevertheless, the developmental discourse has been neither uniform nor devoid of internal tensions. Closer inspection results in the identification of different discourse coalitions which, while sharing a similar understanding of the transport infrastructure problem, steered the project in different directions.

Avoiding marginalization in an integrating Europe: a subnational storyline

In the light of the then-forthcoming establishment of the Single Market in 1993 and the concentration of important investments in the south (the Seville Expo '92 and the Madrid–Seville HSR line) and east (the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona) of the nation-state, Basque actors, especially those from the moderate nationalist political parties and the business sector, expressed a clear concern about becoming economically marginalized from Europe's development axes and thus missing the potential benefits of European integration. This concern had clear roots in the traditionally productive and dynamic economy of the region (Atienza, 1989; Interview 7), but also in the pro-European stance, which Basque moderate nationalism has adopted since the first half of the 20th century, that sees Europe as a source of economic opportunities and of support for their self-government aspirations and promotion of the Basque culture and language (Keating, 2000). The possibility of such a productive and entrepreneurial society becoming isolated from European economic integration constituted a 'dystopian myth' (Hajer, 2003: 105) which became characterized as leading to a 'dark future' (Amann, 2003; El País, 2003).

Accordingly, this new storyline emphasized the necessity of developing a rail network, initially for freight transport, that integrated the region and the port of Bilbao into the European economy and prevented the region's marginalization. Significantly, both connection with the European network and the promotion of an Atlantic development axis, with its core in the Basque Country–Aquitaine cross-border region, were important (Ardanza, 1989). In fact,

‘development axis’ is a key concept in the vocabulary of this storyline. An editorial of the Bilbao-based newspaper *El Correo* headed ‘Not missing the train’ synthesized this storyline clearly:

‘Not only the Basque Country – natural link with much of continental Europe and Great Britain – but also all the Cantabrian coast, seem condemned to wait much more. There is a risk of becoming disconnected from that development axis already evident in the Catalonia– Madrid–Seville triangle, because communications remain the basis of any development and the Basque Country, in particular, is another natural bridge towards the countries of the European Economic Community. There are here, besides, additional factors the strengthening of which will be possible if a good rail network is in place: in particular, the Port of Bilbao, poorly linked, by land, with the rest of Spain and Portugal and, by rail, badly linked too with Europe’ (*El Correo*, 1988a).

Although Basque moderate nationalism and the business sector were both key factors in the articulation and promotion of this storyline – especially the Basque Nationalist Party (Bergara, 1989) and the Chamber of Commerce of Bilbao (*El Correo*, 1988b) – the discourse coalition had a wide, regional membership that included in particular the regional affiliate of the Spanish PSOE political party (*El Correo*, 1989), other business interests (*El Correo*, 1988c), and principal media outlets (*El Correo*, 2006). Importantly, business organizations and governments from the French and Spanish Atlantic regions also shared and practised this storyline (e.g. *El País*, 2002, 2004b).

The emergence of this storyline led to a series of actions that sought to influence the development of a new rail network in the region. These included lobbying with neighbouring regions for an Atlantic transport corridor (Interviews 7 and 11) and the Basque *Plan Europa 93*, which proposed a number of investments in infrastructure, including the new rail line, to promote the development of the Basque Country within an economically integrated Europe (Gobierno Vasco, 1989). In fact, the Basque government’s proposal of the Y-shaped route, which would improve the link between Bilbao and both Vitoria and the French border, was an early example of the discursive practices associated with this storyline (DPTT and SENER, 1987). This proposal was well received by Spanish state actors because it used part of their planned investment for a new link between Vitoria and Bilbao to improve the cross-border connection (Interview 5). However, a fundamental disagreement remained: whereas actors belonging to this coalition frequently maintained that the adoption of the standard gauge would facilitate cross-border transport, the Spanish Ministry of Transport was reluctant to carry out this change due to its cost and technical difficulties (Interviews 2 and 4). This stance, however, was soon to change with the emergence of a new nation-state storyline.

High-speed rail as key to modernization and catching up with Europe: a nation-state storyline

Although modernization of the rail system had already been considered by Spanish state actors in the mid-1980s, towards the end of that decade a remarkable cognitive shift occurred which linked this modernization with the overall development of a nation-state that had not joined the European Economic Community until 1986. The poor condition of the rail system started to be seen not only in transport terms (e.g. as inefficient or non-competitive) but also as a hindrance to economic growth in an integrated Europe (Interviews 4 and 6). Spurred by the availability of European funds through the Structural Funds and, especially, the Cohesion Fund (Interviews 5 and 6), a storyline emerged which promoted the need to modernize the outdated

Spanish infrastructures in order to catch up with the other European economies. Furthermore, high-speed rail and the introduction of the standard gauge were central to this effort.

While the previous storyline emphasized the role of new transport links in promoting economic integration beyond the region, this one envisaged transport infrastructure provision as fostering both economic competitiveness and balanced development within the Spanish territory. This second aspect first became evident with the Madrid–Seville HSR line which, although having its origins in a technical solution to the most important capacity problem of the Spanish network (MTTC, 1987), became not only a sign of modernization but also an instrument to promote the development of the southern Spanish region of Andalusia (Borrell, 1993; Interview 4). Economic competitiveness and balanced development both became part of the same narrative about the modernization of the nation-state, as the following statement by the Minister of Development between 2004 and 2009 in the Spanish legislature illustrates:

As I have expressed on other occasions, infrastructures are for this government an instrument to enhance the competitiveness of our economy, of our productive system and also an instrument of spatial structuring [*vertebración del territorio*], with the clear objective of promoting our internal cohesion and contributing to the development of the less favoured areas. In short, it is an instrument at the service of the modernization of the country and the quality of life of its citizens (Congreso de los Diputados, 2004: 1009–1010).

A broad and long-standing discourse coalition formed around this storyline, fundamentally of a Spanish scope. Although this approach was not understood by technical experts working for the relevant ministry (Interviews 4 and 5), it was shared and reproduced by, notably, the nation-state's political majority (Álvarez, 2006; Borrell, 1993), principal media outlets (El País, 1988, 2005a) and major construction companies (Interview 10). Significantly, it was initially questioned by the trade union CCOO mainly because of the marginalization of the conventional network and therefore of large areas of the country (Santiso and Núñez, 1990), but after the success of the Madrid–Seville HSR line CCOO saw the extension of the high-speed rail network as an opportunity to foster the balanced development of the country (Interview 12).

This storyline was reproduced through a series of discursive practices that were to promote gradually the development of a high-speed rail network in standard track gauge, which in 2005 was planned to extend to approximately 10,000 km by 2020 (El País, 2005b). These policy decisions, in particular the one taken by the Council of Ministers in 1988, were to change significantly the line proposed by the Basque Government. The basic Y-shaped route was retained, but it was now extended to the French border and was designed for high speed and in standard track gauge (DPTT and INECO, 1989). This reshaped proposal did not conflict in principle with the marginalization storyline, because it improved the connection with the French border and permitted goods traffic. Nevertheless, and in spite of the emphasis of this storyline on catching-up with Europe, the network connection with Europe does not seem to have been a priority, at least in its early stages. The emphasis, as a senior official at that time noted, was placed on the domestic network rather than on its borders:

I think I am not wrong if I tell you that at the beginning it is a decision [that of developing high-speed rail lines in standard track gauge] that has a component of necessity to modernize our infrastructures to be in Europe and not to miss the train with Europe, but as an internal matter, as a matter of modernizing our network (Interview 4).

However, this lack of interest in cross-border links was not only opposed by Basque actors. At this time, a third storyline which addressed more explicitly the trans-European dimension, was also gathering support and leading to relevant European policy developments.

Towards a 'frictionless' European space: a European storyline

During the intensification of European integration that occurred in the second half of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s, a new storyline emerged which claimed the need to facilitate the free movement of persons and goods in order to complete the Single Market and maximize its benefits. This involved the development of an appropriate transport infrastructure in order to reduce transport costs and travel times across the European geographic space. The specific advantages of high-speed rail are a significant reduction of travel times, its high capacity, and the provision of a high-quality service (CEC, 1991: 9). This storyline is the one that most closely resembles Hajer's (2000) policy discourse on a 'Europe of Flows'; the fundamental difference is that here this European discourse is conceptualized as one of the several storylines through which a wider developmental discourse is articulated.

This storyline therefore placed emphasis on trans-European relations, but it is important to highlight a further difference with the other storylines: the centrality of the concepts of 'network' and 'key link'. The network constitutes the physical support of the free movement of passengers and goods and therefore of the Single Market. As the 1993 White Paper stated it, '[n]etworks are the arteries of the single market. They are the lifeblood of competitiveness, and their malfunction is reflected in lost opportunities to create new markets and hence in a level of job creation that falls short of our potential' (CEC, 1993: 75). In order for the network to be operational, the completion of certain key links was deemed necessary (CEC, 1991: 12). The former Head of Unit (1991–1995) of the 'network' sub-group of the High Level Group on a trans-European HSR network noted that in particular those key links that were cross-border posed a special difficulty because of nation-state planning differences, relatively limited national attention, and interoperability problems (Interview 1). The progressive development of the network, including its key links, would generate a 'network effect' that would translate to increases in international traffic flows (High-Level Group, 1995). The relevance of both concepts is expressed by the description of the High Level Group's work by a former European Commission official involved in it:

After that year of work, [...] I think that – how to put it – the important idea was to present a map of Europe. And then, when we started to talk about the fact that it was evident that, especially bearing in mind the budget of the European Community at that time, there was no money for it, and at some point the idea came up that maybe the financial – but also the technical – contribution should focus on what was called 'key links' (Interview 2).

The link between Spain and France on the Atlantic side had already been considered as one of these 'key links' (Vitoria–Dax) in the first master plan for the network proposed by the High Level Group (CEC, 1991). From a European perspective, the aforementioned former Head of Unit saw the function of the Vitoria–Dax as more appropriate for freight transport, because the long distances between large urban areas in its corridor (e.g. Madrid–Paris) make high-speed passenger transport uncompetitive (Interview 1). Although in principle this is compatible with a mixed-traffic Vitoria–Irun Y-shaped link, he noted that the European Commission maintained that high-speed rail was intended for long-distance relations rather than those between Bilbao, San Sebastian and Vitoria which were also advocated by the members of the other two discourse coalitions. Particularly important in this key link was the difference in track gauge between the Spanish and French networks. The first European Coordinator appointed by the European Commission for the TEN-T priority project in which the Vitoria–Irun link was included stated in his first progress report that this link 'is unquestionably the section of the Atlantic corridor

that shows the greatest European added value, since it will allow breaking the “bolt” imposed by the gauge between the two networks’ (Davignon, 2006: 6).

This storyline was mobilized primarily by European actors such as the European Commission (CEC, 1991) and Europe-wide business networks (CER, 1989; ERT, 1984), although their influence on the characteristics and timeline of the line was, at least until construction started, not significant. The three storylines, however, would eventually converge in a fourth underpinned by the principles of ecological modernization.

Bringing the storylines together: towards sustainable spatial structuring

Towards the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, as the Vitoria—Irun line gradually moved from policy formulation to implementation and the level of protests against it increased, the actors involved in the diverse discourse coalitions explained above practised a storyline which, if it did not bring them fully together, did bring them closer. On the one hand, the line became seen as supporting a number of spatial relations of different reach at the same time. It would, first, help constitute the trans-European HSR network; second, facilitate the relations between the Iberian peninsula and the rest of Europe; and, third, provide a fast means of physical communication between the main cities of the Basque Country. This physical support was commonly named by Spanish-speaking actors *vertebración del territorio* or ‘spatial structuring’, a concept that links the provision of a physical (infra)structure with the achievement of a balanced regional development.

On the other hand, the environmental dimension of the discourse gained prominence as the high-speed rail line became regarded as fostering economic development whilst contributing to sustainable transport, in particular by promoting modal shift from air and road transport to rail. In this respect, the storyline reflected the more general developments exemplified by the Gothenburg sustainable development strategy (European Council, 2001) and the subsequent White Paper on a sustainable transport system (CEC, 2001); it also served to counteract the arguments made by the emerging protest movement about the environmental impacts of the project. In short, according to this storyline, the new Vitoria—Irun line would promote what may be termed ‘sustainable spatial structuring’, i.e. balanced and sustainable development on a series of different spatial scales.

The manner in which this storyline was articulated varied according to the wide membership of the discourse coalition. For instance, the following statement by a Member of the Basque Nationalists’ Parliamentary Group refers to the benefits of the Vitoria—Irun line at both the European and the Basque level, together with its contribution to sustainable transport:

We [the Basque Government] maintain that it is an infrastructure that is part of a trans-European network of general interest and is key to guarantee competitiveness and employment at European level. [...] It also involves making progress in the structuring of the region [*vertebración del país*], in its internal cohesion. Emphasis should also be made on the importance of this infrastructure in terms of supporting both passenger and freight transport, which on the one hand facilitates the free movement of people by public transport, and on the other entails substantial progress in our transport network, since there will be an important transfer of goods from roads to rail (Parlamento Vasco, 2005: 46–47).

In terms of the environmental benefits of the line, all actors of this coalition shared the view of high-speed rail as a sustainable mode of transport, but it was the potential of the line to reduce cross-border road traffic, in particular freight transport, that was particularly prominent. The Basque Government’s recognition of cross-border goods traffic as a key problem can be

traced back to the early 2000s (Amann, 2004; El Correo, 2000). Apart from advocating the development of the cross-border rail link, this government has also sought to address this issue and, more generally, the sustainability of transport by promoting initiatives such as *ferroustage* or short-voyage shipping by sea through the Aquitaine–Euskadi Logistic Platform (Interview 9), and by contributing to the Atlantic Arc Commission of the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions (Interview 8). The problem of freight transport by road also entered the agenda of the Spanish Government, which designed the high-speed rail network of its 2005 infrastructure plan for mixed traffic (Ministerio de Fomento, 2005) and later issued a strategic plan for the promotion of rail freight transport (Ministerio de Fomento, 2010). According to the Spanish Secretary of State for Planning and Infrastructures, between 2004 and 2011 the studies of the Franco–Spanish Observatory of Traffic in the Pyrenees clearly indicated the importance of a new Atlantic cross-border link to shift passenger and freight traffic to rail (Interview 3), a case also made by the European Commission (CEC, 2008; Davignon, 2006).

Conclusion

The Vitoria–Irun HSR line provides an illustration of the variety of rationales present in major transport infrastructure development in the EU and how they shaped both the characteristics and the timeline of the project.

On the one hand, the different storylines were sufficiently compatible to prevent major disagreements arising over the line. The Atlantic corridor emphasis of Basque concerns was consonant with the views proposing the establishment of an integrated trans-European network. Moreover, the design proposed by the Basque Government addressed two of the Spanish Government's concerns in one go: it improved both the integration of Bilbao in the Spanish network and the deficient link between the latter and the French border. The emergence of the 'sustainable spatial structuring' storyline further helped consolidate a consensus over the design of the line through an emphasis on sustainable transport and multi-scalar benefits.

On the other hand, the different understandings of the policy problem caused tensions among those who practised the hegemonic discourse and resulted in struggles to achieve influence in the policy process. The diverging senses of urgency of the Spanish and Basque governments led to a significant conflict of competencies between both in the first half of the 2000s; and the lack of priority in particular regarding the cross-border section, coupled with the limited powers of EU institutions, prevented the proponents of the European storyline to satisfy their concern of establishing promptly the TEN-T 'key link'. On the whole, the Vitoria–Irun line may be seen as a compromise between the different storylines through which the hegemonic discourse was articulated, reflecting in turn the influence that the different actors involved were able to exert in policy-making.

The discourse analysis on the Vitoria–Irun line therefore permits qualification of the assertion of the existence of a single discourse 'shared by policy makers at different levels of government' (Hajer, 2000: 135) that pushes 'towards a new European space of uniform flow' (Jensen and Richardson, 2004: 3). Although the existence of an overarching hegemonic discourse seems evident, this has in turn been articulated through a series of storylines, generally – although not always to the same extent – related to particular scales. Hajer's (2000) discourse on a 'Europe of Flows' is therefore conceptualized better as a specific storyline within a wider developmental discourse that emphasizes the economic development dimension of transport infrastructure and the role of high-speed rail in it. Jensen and Richardson (2004: 4) acknowledged the importance of cities as nodes in the global flows of capital and information,

but the analysis presented here suggests a more nuanced understanding of this space of flows. The discourse coalitions that were formed around the Vitoria–Irun line had different understandings of the reach and qualities that the spatial relations facilitated by the line should have; some favoured freight transport along the Atlantic corridor, while others advocated medium- or short-distance inter-urban passenger transport. In line with Harrison and Growe’s (2014) argument that territorial forms of state organization are not incompatible with the construction of relational spaces, this case further shows how multiple scalar frames may involve different, and at times competing, relational spaces. The articulation of the space of flows is therefore an essentially contested, and certainly not predetermined, process.

Whilst the study of a single case, particularly an unusual one, does not permit generalizing its findings to a wider set of cases, the Vitoria–Irun policy process does question the existence of a monolithic discourse that unequivocally leads to a seamless European space. Examples with a focus on the evident conflict between the long-distance spatial relations promoted by high-speed rail and the spaces it bypasses, such as the new Turin–Lyon HSR line through the Italian Val di Susa (Della Porta and Piazza, 2008), might in fact suggest that such a discourse on a ‘Europe of Flows’ exists, and studies of particular urban regions may demonstrate how such a discourse might in turn be articulated according to subnational concerns (e.g. Linnros and Hallin, 2001). By providing a wider, multi-scalar illustration of cross-border transport infrastructure policymaking, the study of the Vitoria–Irun case goes one step further, to show the complex discursive landscape that may characterize trans-European transport infrastructure policy-making. Although there are signs that EU action on Trans-European Networks has increased over the last decade (Marshall, 2014), this complexity is likely to exist at present, not least in the light of the recent setback to European integration, albeit the study of other cases of trans-European transport infrastructure would shed light on its importance and characteristics. However, to conclude, this study reveals a worrying implication for critical perspectives on this topic. While the hegemonic discourse is complex and characterized by internal tensions, it permeates and is embedded in multiple scalar trajectories and arenas. Attempts to develop alternative discursive constructions should therefore not simply engage with a supposedly European hegemonic project, but rather with the multiplicity of broadly compatible projects that drive transport infrastructure development in the EU.

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Appendix 1. List of interviews

Interview number	Interviewees	Date of interview
1	Head of Unit of Networks and Transport Infrastructure at the European Commission (1991–1995)	25 January 2012
2	Former official at the Directorate General Transport and Energy at the European Commission	15 March 2012
3	Secretary of State for Planning and Infrastructures at the Spanish Ministry of Development (2004–2011)	26 January 2012
4	Senior official at the Spanish ministries of public works and transport (1985–1994), including Secretary General for Land Transport Infrastructures (1991–1994)	10 April 2012
5	Senior official at the Spanish ministries of public works and transport (1985–1988, 1991–1996), including Director General for Rail Transport Infrastructures (1994–1996)	29 May 2012
6	Senior official at the Spanish ministries of public works and transport (1994–2008), including Director General for Planning and Territorial Coordination (2005–2008)	22 May 2012
7	Basque Minister for Transport and Public Works (1998–2005)	13 December 2011
8	Basque Director for Transport (2005–2007) and former Coordinator of the Transport Group of the Atlantic Arc Commission	15 May 2012
9	Head of the Basque Minister for Transport and Public Works' Cabinet (2006–2009) and Director of the Aquitaine–Euskadi Logistic Platform (2005–2007)	11 May 2012
10	Director of Economic Studies and Manager of Export Group of SEOPAN (Association of Nationwide Public Works Companies)	23 May 2012
11	Senior official at the Chamber of Commerce of Bilbao	10 May 2012
12	Former engineer at the Trade Union CCOO	22 May 2012